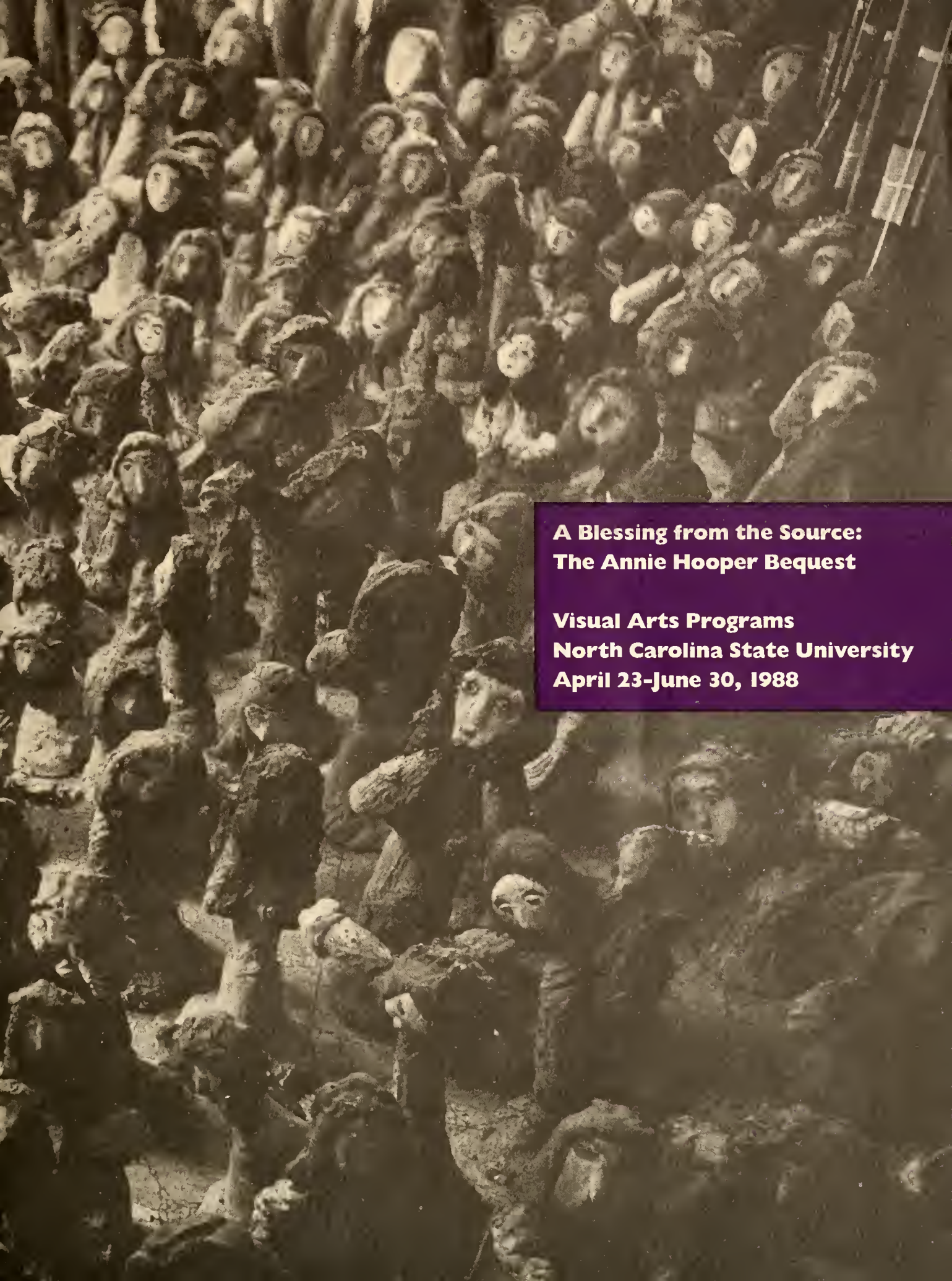
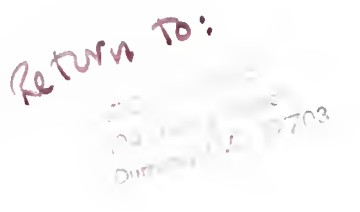


A Blessing from the Source: The Annie Hooper Bequest

Visual Arts Programs
North Carolina State University
April 23-June 30, 1988

ANNIE HOOPER



INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this exhibition is to present for the first time in a public setting a portion of the extraordinary art of visionary artist Annie Hooper of Buxton, North Carolina. Guest curator Roger Manley has written a very fine and moving essay to accompany this exhibition. This first serious attempt to explain her work will shape the future study of visionary art and artists. The symposium, held April 23, further attests to the national and international significance of this exhibition and the *genre* it represents. The symposium will make an important contribution to research and scholarship when the papers are published.

Because of the limited temporary exhibition space only a small portion of Mrs. Hooper's work could be shown. Manley chose two large narrative scenes and five vignettes which give some sense of the range of her ideas, sources, and the way in which she visually interpreted hymns, scripture, and narratives. The scenes include many flowers, animals, tinsel, and other decorations because that is the way she set them up in her home. The profusion in her home could not be matched here so we have tried to convey a taste of that experience. The original context of the work in her home is illustrated with photographs. Annie Hooper is introduced in Manley's short videotape which precedes the exhibition.

For the opportunity to make North Carolina State University a site of such importance the UAB Art Committee and Visual Arts Programs gratefully acknowledge the support of the North Carolina Humanities Commission and the Jargon Society, keeper of the Hooper Bequest, and the many people here, Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Department Heads, Directors, Faculty, Staff and Students who have given us their strong support and encouragement as we have planned and developed *"A Blessing from the Source."*

Charlotte Vestal Brown
Director, Visual Arts Programs

Studio portrait, late 1940's

A NOTE

There are a few of us severe ancients around who aren't inclined to vote for Pat Robertson because he tells us how 'good' he is; or, to pay money because Michael Jackson tells us how 'bad' he is. Jeremiah's view is bleak: "The heart is deceitful above all things, & desperately wicked: who can know it?" Tom Waits suggests that the Devil is just God when He's drunk —that's a mite more palatable to us post-modern Zoroastrians.

The Jargon Society has always been interested in isolated poets and artists who had nothing to sell their Mammonite friends. Poetry has no value beyond itself, like clean water when you need it. Here, on a good day in human history, April 23rd (the birthday or deathday of Shakespeare and J.M.W. Turner, Prokofiev and Jimmie Noone, Vladimir Nabokov and Warren Spahn, Roy Orbison and Cervantes, Henry Vaughan and William Wordsworth), we are offered this wonderful first opportunity to see clearly what Miss Annie Hooper, of Buxton, North Carolina, thought of King Belshazzar and the handwriting on his wall. (MENE MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN! comes across nicely in Roark Bradford's black-gospel translation: HEAVY HEAVY HANG OVER THY HEAD!) Yes, indeed, something to worry about. But, more, a formal amazement—in front of our eyes because of the amazing lady who made the figures; Roger Manley, who first found the work and, later (when it mattered) saved it from destruction; and the welcoming auspices of North Carolina State University.

As Trappists and Enthusiasts and pileated woodpeckers and clumps of Shortia need refuge and wild-life preserves, people like Annie Hooper, Georgia Blizzard, Basil Bunting, St. EOM, Paul Metcalf, Alfred Starr Hamilton, John Menapace, Thelonious Sphere Monk, and Lorine Niedecker need the crucial dignity of our attention and the help of institutions to make exhibitions and documents, such as today's feast—not only Miss Annie, but the Reverend Finster, the incredible Henry Darger, and much, much more. Amen! Huzza! Selah!

Jonathan Williams, Publisher
The Jargon Society
Highlands, North Carolina

A BLESSING FROM THE SOURCE

Thirty-five years before she died on January 11, 1986, Annie Hooper began filling up her large Outer Banks house with hundreds of sculptures made of painted driftwood, putty, seashells and cement. One by one, rooms were abandoned to the figures crowded together on the floor, atop and underneath furniture, in closets and hallways, down the stairs, through bedrooms, parlors and kitchens, nearly all of them depicting Biblical scenes and characters. Hundreds of Hebrews followed Moses and the Pillar of Fire to the Promised Land in what had once been the sun porch, while the dancers and musicians at Belshazzar's Feast revelled beneath the Handwriting on the Wall in an upstairs bathroom. Daniel prayed among twenty gold-painted cement lions in an outbuilding and the Golden Calf was worshipped in the middle of a kitchen floor.

In all, the nearly five thousand figures illustrated some three hundred stories and lessons from the Bible. Scenes overlapped and flowed together in overwhelming confusion, separated only by strings of tinsel and bouquets of plastic flowers. Colored Christmas lights cast a magical glow over throngs gathered on blue carpets. Pathways lined with herds of sheep and flocks of angels led to lightswitches and windows. Movement through the house became increasingly difficult or impossible as the figures took over every available space.

Why would anyone do this? Why did a bright and witty housewife like Annie Hooper begin to make sculpture relatively late in life and then continue to make it, without any thought of recognition or financial reward, despite the obvious and unusual inconvenience it caused? Her life history provides important clues to the nature of this creative activity, because at age fifty Hooper suddenly became a visionary artist—an artist whose work doesn't easily fit into traditional categories like "fine" or "folk" art, someone who worked in fact without any notion of herself as an artist at all.

She was born on Cape Hatteras at Buxton, the easternmost town in North Carolina, on February 26, 1897. Her father, Christopher Columbus Miller, owned a grocery and general store, drawing additional income from a Civil War pension. He married twice, fathering nine children with his first wife, then a set of twins and two more with Mary Ormond Tyer, his second wife. Annie and her fraternal twin sister were born prematurely, and still suckled a wet nurse when their mother had her last two babies. Their house bustled with people. In addition to his own children their father took in and raised fourteen foster children, including a black child and a retarded man who lived with the family for 45 years. Mrs. Miller, a teacher at the Hatteras school before she married, took Annie and the rest of her brood bathing and crabbing in Pamlico Sound, on horse rides up the beach and long walks in Buxton Woods or up the long dirt road to the Methodist Church, the center of community life. Packed into the second pew with her family every Sunday listening to the circuit preacher Annie learned a clear and simple understanding of God's love.

Annie Hooper with "Sermon on the Mount" scene, 1983

Living room, 1971

One time I had two dimes somebody gave me and Momma said, "How about giving them to the Lord? You know he always pays back double." So I gave them at church and I waited and I waited and I waited, and the Lord didn't give my dimes back. I came to the store crying and I told Poppa that Momma told me the Lord would give me double if I'd give him my dimes. Poppa said, "Well, he will, he never fails." We had a gate with wide white boards and that same afternoon when I went in the gate and looked where the raindrops had washed down the gatepost I found four dimes laying there plain and shiny under those rain drops. It made me believe!

At the turn of the century Buxton was one of the most inaccessible villages in eastern America. Situated at a bend in Hatteras Island that forms the Cape, it was sheltered by the only maritime forest of any size on the Outer Banks. Apart from the woods the landscape was elemental: pounding surf, sand dunes, sound-side marshes, and windy sky. For most of its 65-mile length the island is rarely more than a mile wide.

Annie was six years old when the Wright brothers chose Kitty Hawk (an hour closer to the mainland) as sufficiently remote and breezy to test their new aeroplane, and sixty-six before automobiles could drive over from the mainland without a ferry trip. For a long time the weekly mail boat was the only regular connection with the outside world. Even so, the tiny fishing communities along the Outer Banks and across the inland sounds were bound together by common survival strategies and closely-knit family ties. Banks fishermen found safe harbors for their boats in mainland creeks during hurricanes, and mainland fishermen followed shoals of fish beyond the Banks out into the Gulf Stream currents. During slack seasons families visited relatives across the water. Outer Banks children went to the mainland for medical care and to finish school. Annie had attended high school in New Bern and begun college in Blackstone, Virginia, when she met John Hooper in a small mainland fishing village on her way home for Christmas.

The first time I ever saw him was in church in Stumpy Point. He was sitting on the second seat to the front and they called on him for a prayer. I thought it was the prettiest prayer I'd ever heard and I wanted to speak to him afterward.

That afternoon Annie told her sister that she had seen the man she would marry. Before long she invited John over to Buxton and fell in love with him. They married and moved across Pamlico Sound to live near his family in Stumpy Point. In less than two weeks he and his eight brothers built a house to suit Annie's long-cherished plans. A year later she had a son. Labor and childbirth were so prolonged and painful her husband resolved never to put her through the trauma again.

They lived at Stumpy Point for the next 26 years. John and their son Edgar worked together as commercial fishermen. Annie taught herself to play Methodist hymns and served as the church organist, Sunday School teacher and lay minister. She accompanied her lessons with her own poems, using the mnemonics of verse and a gift for rhyme to reinforce her material. Throughout her life she wrote hundreds of poems and songs, preferring to write even personal letters in rhyming stanzas. When her husband came home from fishing each day she would try to have a new poem ready for him.

If I could write in the language of angels
On sheets of shining gold
And forever write my love for you
The half could not be told.

Sometimes these romantic notes were humorous:

I wish I was a skeeter-bug
You know what I would do!
I'd fly along with that old gas-boat
And keep on biting you.

And on occasion her poems revealed a biting wit, as in a letter she sent to a newspaper reporter:

Therefore I must say, seeing you in this light,
I would judge you as desirable as a sucking parasite,
and about as valuable to the human race
as a pock on the skin of a small pox victim's face,
—about as valuable or useful to mankind,
as a polypus to the nose like Drs. sometimes find.

When Charles Lindbergh's baby boy was kidnapped in 1932, Annie wrote a long emotionally-charged poem in which she sympathized deeply with the young parents' loss of their only son:

A house that was so lovely, now desolate and bare,
with memories sad and painful lingering everywhere.
A weeping mother suffering too,
for there's nothing for baby that she can do.

Annie Hooper (*right*), with cousin, 1924

An anxious mother waiting for news.
A bereaved father following false given clues.

Her years on Stumpy Point were happy ones, the weekly rhythms of work, rest, play and worship broken only occasionally by storms and funerals. Her many relatives on both sides of the family and both sides of the Sound were frequent guests and there was a whirl of church and social activities. Annie planted flowers around her dream house, wrote songs she sold to record companies and published poems in the church newsletter. She looked forward to long years of watching her small family mature and grow old together.

Then suddenly

. . . there came a shadow on our home that faced the bay,
one that hugs and kisses could not chase away.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entry into the Second World War interrupted Stumpy Point's isolated calm. Most of the men in the community left to join in the war effort. Edgar was sent to the South Pacific in the Army Engineers while John went to work at the Norfolk Naval Shipyards. Annie remained behind in the dream house built for her, and for perhaps the first time in her life, she spent the night alone. Far across the sound, just beyond the horizon, she could see the glow of the lighthouse that had illuminated every night of her childhood.

I sat by my window and I sat there by the hour,
just gazing at the flashing light from the old Cape Hatteras Tower.
The lure of old Cape Hatteras seemed to get a grip on me,
while my lover was away and my son across the sea.

I knew that my thinking was not as it ought to be
with my loved ones off working to help make our country free,
but it seemed that the thoughts of my former home sweet home
would not go off and leave me as I sat there all alone.

She began to cry out for God's help. Overcome with emotion and stress, she couldn't stop crying.

Her worried husband located rooms near the shipyard and moved her up to live with him in Norfolk. They soon bought a large brick house, outfitted it with massive furniture, and began taking in boarders. At the peak of wartime activity Annie was cooking and cleaning for thirty-five people who roomed with them, trying to stay too busy to think about the dangers her son was facing in the Pacific war. She fixed up a room in the house that was to be his room when he returned, crocheting lace antimacassars for its heavy Victorian furniture.

For six long years we labored, for six long years we prayed,
for six long anxious years in that big house we stayed.
When the mailman's whistle sounded I ran hoping there would be
some little message for us that had come across the sea.

After the war ended Annie worriedly awaited Edgar's release from service. More than a year passed while he remained in the Philippines. At last the strain was too much. She began to

faint repeatedly, each time experiencing temporary amnesia.

When her son finally did return he was thirty years old and eager to begin his career. He was beyond the age of living with his parents and ready to start his own family. Annie had dreamed of her family returning to its former unity and simplicity with the three of them living and working together, but Edgar left Norfolk within a few days and went to Buxton where he planned to buy a grocery store with his saved-up pay. It was the second time Annie's cherished plans had failed to materialize. She was depressed and miserable once more, but wanted to be with her son. John and Annie soon left Norfolk themselves and moved to Buxton to live in her brother's old house.

Many things we had to leave that
we'd been proud to own.
The big stone mantle and
chandeliers would not fit in
the old house
where we planned to make a
home.
What a mess we had trying to get
our massive stuff
into the little house that was not
big enough.

So my husband decided what he
thought was best to do
was to build a bigger house and
build it big enough for two.
For months we worked and
worked until our house was
done.
One apartment was for us, and
the other for our son.

Edgar helped build Annie's new house, and then lived for a while in the upstairs apartment. By now the insular character of the village Annie remembered from childhood had changed. Her brothers and sisters were grown up and busy with their own affairs, and Buxton had become a popular vacation spot for hundreds of summer people. John Hooper built a motel that became their main income. In 1948 Edgar married one of the summer visitors, and he and his wife moved out of Annie's house when they finished their own.

Then Edgar was stricken with lung problems and was sent away for a year to convalesce in the clear mountain air of Asheville. Separated from her beloved son once more, and fearing that he had survived the war only to succumb to illness, Annie fell into a profound depression that apparently intensified still more when it coincided with the onset of menopause. The emotional strain became unbearable and brought on a series of blackouts and breakdowns. She sought treatments from a doctor in Raleigh, a seven-hour drive from her Buxton home. While under his care she lived with her twin sister, Mamie.

Mamie Jeannette worked as a teacher in Raleigh's Central Prison and Women's Prison. Like many of their father's offspring she was deeply religious, with a practical approach to belief. She brought home Bible tracts for Annie to read and took her along one day when she ministered to prisoners on Death Row. As her sister spoke, Annie saw how the inmates found comfort by identifying with the troubles encountered by the ancient saints and heroes. In their terror and loneliness they were able to feel and hear the meanings of the stories in a way that other people could not. Annie began to sense a connection between her own pain and the Biblical teachings in a direct way that she was unable to articulate verbally. Her unconscious transformation into an

***Left to right*: Annie, Edgar, and John Hooper, about 1949**

House John Hooper built for Annie in Buxton, photo 1959

artist had begun, because physical objects would soon offer a key to unlocking her feelings.

Annie returned to Buxton after four months' treatment in Raleigh. She was still weak from her ordeal and John refused to let her scrub floors or make beds at their motel. She rested at home, turning often to a large illustrated Bible to occupy her mind. One day she picked up a suggestive piece of driftwood, fashioned a face on it with English putty, and colored it with left-over paint from the motel. "Moses on Mount Nebo looking over the River Jordan into the Promised Land of Canaan" was the first of what she later called her "symbols." Next she made a small scene of Jesus ministering to little children, and then an angel. Her husband encouraged her, thinking the activity would help her recover. It was not long before she was spending all her free moments hard at work making figures from other Bible stories.

> *When I came home from Raleigh I began to work it all out in scenes. Early morning till late at night I was working, and when I wasn't working I was out through the woods or down to the sea side looking for something to work with. I always found what I wanted and I'd come back with all I could carry. I had a light put in the barn where I could work at night when I wanted to. I believe that when God requires us to do things he will equip us and make us ready.*

Though she felt that God had guided her to do this work, she clearly but unconsciously chose to create "symbols" that had particular meaning to her own terrifying experience with loneliness, with her fears of losing her child, her separation from home, and the potential loss of love. Like Moses, she had gazed with longing toward a distant shore, and felt the power of God entering late in life. Like Rachel and Sarah she knew the pain of childbirth, like Abraham or Mary she knew what it was to be called upon to sacrifice a son. She found a parallel between the massacre of the innocents by Pharaoh and Herod and her own loss of childbearing capabilities.

She identified strongly with Mary, like herself the wife of a carpenter and a "co-worker with God," and with Daniel, bounded by things to be feared. Esau and Job showed that life is often unfair and unpredictable and that God speaks "through affliction" and "the pressure of circumstance," because the "Lord knows how to use either the rod or the Shepherd's Crook." These and hundreds of other stories took on physical form in the rooms of her house.

There are conspicuous absences from the scenes she built. Though she made groups of figures depicting the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ there is no Crucifixion scene. The Devil, a frequent player in the Biblical drama, appears only once (or twice, counting the serpent in Eden) in all the thousands of figures she made. Hooper created only the characters that reflected some aspect of her own emotional life. She surrounded herself with physical symbols of her own inner life because she could no longer rely on the security of her large childhood family or the distractions of a friendly crowd of guests and boarders, and was beyond the age when she could recreate her nuclear family.

"Adam and Eve"

Hooper's illustrated Bible

"Belshazzar's Feast" from Hooper's Bible

"Belshazzar's Feast" first version, about 1960, *photograph by Aycock Brown*

"Belshazzar's Feast" final version, 1985

I went in the order of just what I was thinking at the time. The more you do the more you know how to do, and what you find depends a lot on what you look for.

She saw the hand of the Creator in every natural thing, and had a remarkable ability to discern figures and faces in clouds, roots, twigs, the wood grain of furniture, and even in food. If she saw a face in a fried egg she could hardly bring herself to destroy the form by eating it. As much as possible she used shapes provided by the existing pieces of wood she found, adding as little as possible to transform them into things others could recognize. A bit of cement or putty and some marbles or shells for eyes were usually enough to make the figures tell the stories she was trying to convey.

I found a piece of wood that looked like a calf so I made the story of the Prodigal Son. I found another that looked like a lamb so I made the lamb as a sacrifice. Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb of God. When I was trying to make Abraham and the sacrifice of his son Isaac I went out to look for something to make the ram in the thicket. Just as I was almost home and hadn't found anything, I kicked over a stump and there was a ram in it already made. I had to cement a tail to it but the head and body were already there.

Her craftsmanship developed through experimentation over the years. She devised ways of casting and attaching cement wings and limbs and wet-shaping faces and feet so that less time had to be spent searching

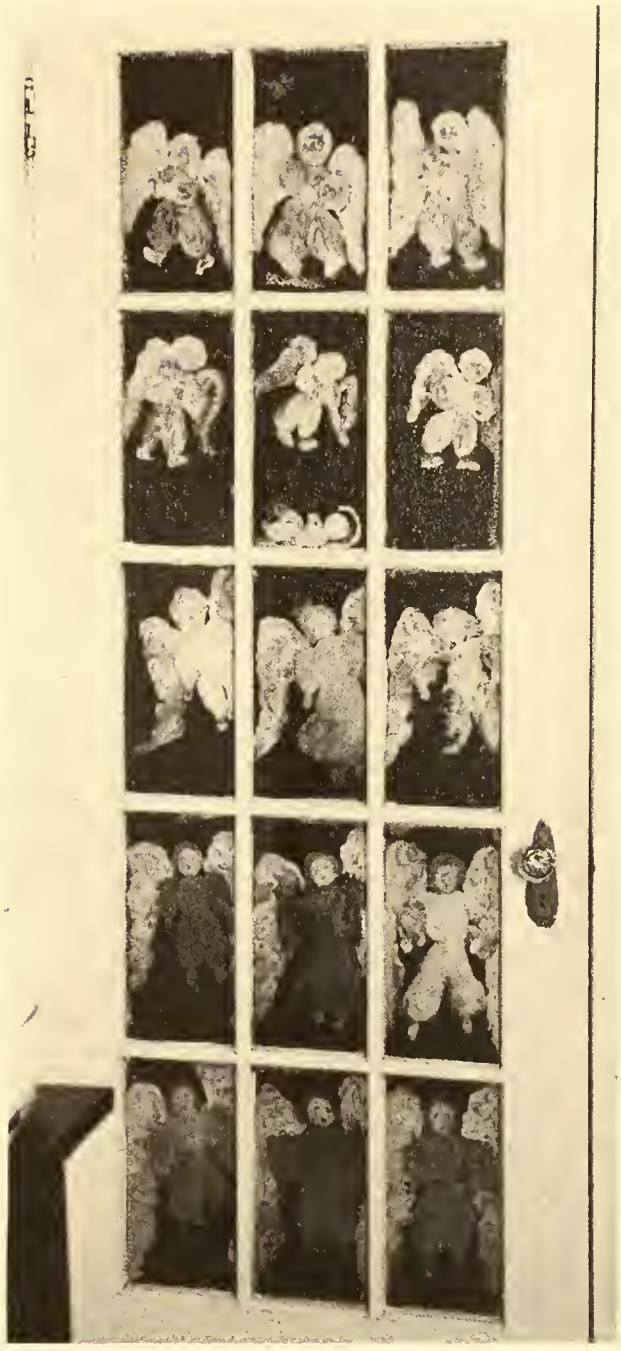
for the pre-existing forms. In time her production methods made it possible for her to contemplate making extremely large scenes, some with more than 300 separate figures.

> *If I really wanted to, I could spend all week on one symbol, making it nearly perfect. But when you're trying to do what I'm trying to do, you just make that symbol good enough to tell that part of the story and move on to the next one.*

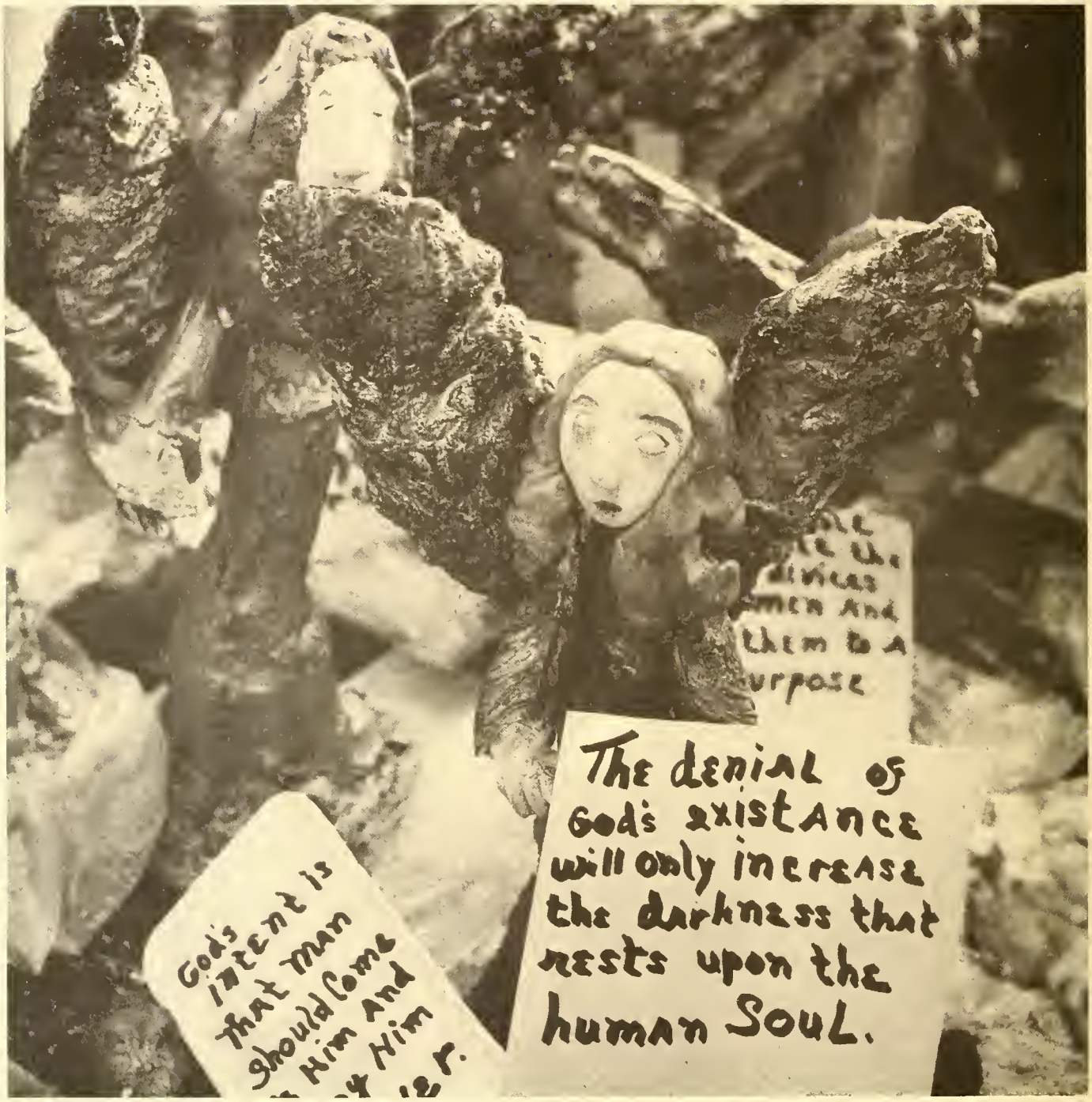
She often rebuilt early scenes using her improved techniques, redistributing and incorporating older figures into new scenes. What had begun as a collection of figures slowly became a total art environment, contained within the shell of her outwardly ordinary home.

As people began to hear about her work she often met strangers at the door and took them through her house. When she explained the scenes there was a constant interaction between her own feelings and the figures she made. The work was never really intended to be separated from her; it was not meant for galleries, sales, or personal gain, though late in life she hoped it would find a permanent home where others could appreciate it and learn from it.

While she spoke, she moved the figures about, leaning the symbol of Jesus down over the prone symbol of Lazarus and bidding him to rise, or rolling the cement "stone" away from the "sepulcher" while saying, "This is what God wants each of us to do—to roll away the stone of unbelief from our hearts." She wanted to make sure that the thoughts visitors had would be those she intended, and as long as she could physically do so she spent



Painted glass on bathroom door



Angels, living room floor

hours narrating the work for anyone who might come to see it.

Some people say "one lesson by sight is worth a thousand words" but I never could agree. The world was made by spoken words, the Word of God.

In 1978 John Hooper was crippled by a stroke. For the next three and a half years before his death Annie took care of her husband at home and let curious visitors wander through the rooms by themselves. All work on the scenes stopped during this time. To take the place of her personal narration she set up hundreds of signs throughout the house with messages to accompany the figures. Though many of the signs were derived from scripture or hymns, most came from her own perceptions of Bible teachings:

He who touches the throne of grace with one hand can touch the hearts of others with the other hand.

When the heart is right with God then the hands are quick to work.

The cry of the heart for God is the cry that brings down blessings from that high source.

Her husband's death was a terrible blow, though long expected. In the four years she survived him she gradually resumed making her sculptures and writing poetry, finding comfort from her grief in the activities which had answered her needs at other traumatic times in her life.

I feel like I've been dedicated and set apart for God's work. I believe that, but I haven't gotten to the point that I'm perfect. I'm not an angel, I'm an aged imp. I can only live in hope, fully believing that God will bless me by making me a blessing to others, and I think I have been. When people come, they come seeking something of the supernatural, and they get it when they get God's word. Here they get not only God's word but they get a symbol resembling the thought that they have. My work is all the work of love, working out the Biblical scenes that will last through the ages long after I'm gone. That is my motive, that is my purpose, making figures with some spiritual thought to go along. When I look back over the work I've done it amazes me—but still is it not something to be worshipped. It is something that will tell a story.

The story has a subtext. Beneath the retelling of Bible stories are the stories of her own life, and how she dealt with loss and loneliness. In her kitchen, which had doubled as her workshop ever since the shed filled up, stood 47 more grieving Hebrew mothers awaiting their last coat of paint when Annie Hooper died. They were to stand by the side of an imaginary Nile, searching for their lost children, crying out for God. Like Annie, they hoped to call down a blessing from that high source.

Painting on bedroom door glass

Hooper with "King Solomon" in 1984

All too often, the creative work of visionary artists like Annie Hooper has been dismissed as merely eccentric because it doesn't immediately lend itself to obvious rational interpretation. The term "visionary"—chosen here because it seems less pejorative than "isolate," "raw," or "outsider," and more accurate than "folk," or "naive"—unfortunately still conjures up an image of individuals living in a dream-world totally out of touch with reality.

By examining the lives of visionary artists and seeing how experience combines with belief, it is possible to give the lie to this image. Of course, not all visionary artists are as articulate as Annie Hooper was, nor as comfortable with visitors, but any who are accessible and willing should be gently studied. When collectors and curators focus on the physical objects and environments visionaries make, to the exclusion of any thorough examination of their human source, they miss an opportunity to understand and appreciate the work for what it reveals, not only about the artist but about the social milieu surrounding him.

The American South, for instance, has nurtured a disproportionate number of visionaries who derive their major creative energies and inspiration from religion. Besides Annie Hooper, Howard Finster, Benjamin Perkins, John Ruth, Leroy Almon, Gertrude Morgan, Minnie Evans, W.C. Rice, Mary T. Smith, Vernon Burwell, John Lilley, Edgar Tolson, and J.B. Murray are only a few of the Southern visionaries whose work incorporates Scriptural imagery. Elsewhere in the country and the world, politics, war, sex, animals, humor, or popular (mass) culture are some of the more common sources for visionary art, but in the South more often than not it is religion, especially in the form of Protestant Christianity (St. EOM's Land of Pasaquan, a religious environment in Buena Vista, Georgia, is the great exception to the rule).

While it may initially seem tautological that in a Protestant-dominated region there should be a preponderance of Christian visionary art, there doesn't seem to be a corresponding proportion of religiously inspired visionaries in the Catholic West or Southwest, or in Europe, except for a scattering of miniature "holy lands" often constructed by monks and probably related to wayside shrine and garden art traditions. This may be because religion in these regions has incorporated channels for emotional release within traditional genres, but it also indicates a particular aspect of Protestantism. Certainly with an emphasis on personal salvation and each individual's own single relationship with God, the various Protestant denominations encourage the kind of emotional isolation that leads so many visionaries like Annie Hooper to begin creative work during a time when their primary feelings were loneliness or loss. There is a sign in Howard Finster's Paradise Garden environment in north Georgia which outlines his own feeling of apartness from his fellow humans:

I AM HOWARD FINSTER. A STRANGER FROM ANOTHER WORLD. MY FATHER AND MOTHER. MY SISTERS AND BROTHERS. MY WIFE. MY CHILDREN. MY GRAND CHILDREN. HAVE NEVER REALY FIGURED ME OUT. FOR MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS

Figure from "The Ascension" scene

WORLD. MY FATHER IN HEAVEN KNOWS ME. ON THIS PLANET. AND THATS WHY I HAVE BEEN STRONG AND HAPPY.

In Benjamin Perkins' environment in the pine woods of Alabama there is a stone memorial he has set up to himself and the loneliness of rejection, which reads:

IN SACRED MEMORY OF BENJAMIN F. PERKINS WHO BUILT A CHURCH FOR THOSE HE LOVED ONLY TO BE REJECTED AND BETRAYED WITH A JUDAS BETRAYEL PETITION . . . THEN TURNED OUT OF THE CHURCH HE LOVED . . . THIS CAUSED ME A BROKEN HEART FROM WHICH I WILL NOT RECOVER. BFP

The particular isolation of the elderly, the disenfranchised, and the powerless, and the importance placed on evangelism in the rural Protestant South perhaps uniquely forces individuals to solve their own problems in a way that sometimes engenders art. This can be true whether or not the art itself is overtly religious.

People react to emotional stress in a variety of different ways. Thoughts that can't be articulated verbally or musically could come out as violence among violence-prone people, for instance, or as art in people who are latently artistic. While a fiddle tune may affirm connections within a community or folk group, visionary art offers a valid response to personal situations the group is not equipped to solve through traditional means, and this can teach important lessons about the limitations of that same group.

Ethical and moral considerations are often tossed aside in a rush to exhibit and promote visionary art in a way that isolates the work from its context and beggars the artist himself. Fortunately, Annie Hooper was spared all that. Though late in life she was frequently approached by dealers and collectors, she never sold a piece. Her work was too much a part of herself to let it go. Because all of it was indoors it was spared damage by weather or by the vandals and collectors that often loot other visionary art environments. As a result, the bequest she left to the Jargon Society may be the largest single holding by any visionary artist anywhere. The cultural and scholarly obligations of preserving it together are compelling. Other than a very few pieces kept by her family and friends for sentimental reasons, her entire oeuvre is intact.

Less than 5% of her work is displayed in the present exhibition; the rest awaits future study and presentation. It is hoped that the sampling shown here gives a sense of the whole, though admittedly it can't adequately do justice to the entire body of work she made. Of course, it would be impossible to reproduce the exact feeling of the work in its original context. To do that, one would need to duplicate the house, room by room, the furniture, and even the boom and roar of the distant surf for its constant reminder of the power and presence of nature. And if all this could somehow be accomplished, it would still not be completely true to the original environment without Annie Hooper's presence because she herself is the central figure in all the stories.

In her later years, when she faced the immensity of her work and her own mortality, she often spoke of how it should be displayed. In her mind's eye she envisioned a large, simple room with all the work displayed together. There would be pathways so that visitors could walk among the scenes easily, as they could never do in Buxton. The work would be lighted well, and all the scenes would be visible from the entrance to the room. The effect should be almost like entering the city of Heaven and coming face-to-face with all the ones who had arrived before. There would be a sense of overwhelming Presence. And in that Presence, each visitor could find something of themselves.

—Roger Manley, Guest Curator

Roger Manley was 18 when he first met Annie Hooper in 1970. She was 73.

Hooper with "Brazen Serpent" or "Staff of Moses" in 1974

"The Exodus"
in the sun porch